

Radicalism

OLIVIER ROY

The recent burst of violence linked with the Saudi-born Islamic militant, Usama Bin Laden, sheds some light on a recent evolution of Islamic radicalism. In the eighties, most of the violence was linked either to an internal confrontation between a state and its Islamist opposition (Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, and later Algeria) or to a state-sponsored terrorism with strategic goals: for instance, the attacks against US and French barracks in Lebanon in 1983-4 and the hostage-takings of 1985 were aimed at ending the Western support for Iraq in the war with Iran. In the nineties, the internal violence either decreased or is no longer threatening the state apparatus. It is rather being directed at 'side-targets' (like tourists in Egypt, former fellow-Islamists, or the civilian population in Algeria).

Most of the main-stream Islamist movements endeavoured, more or less successfully, to enter the legal political scene (Turkey, Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, Egypt) and largely gave up their supra-national agenda in favour of a national posture (Refah, FIS), if not nationalist (Palestinian Hamas, but also ... Islamic Iran). But this normalization of the Islamist movements left aside a new kind of radical fringe.

The bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York (1993) was probably the harbinger of new patterns of radical Islamist violence. The targets are symbolic Western (and more precisely American) buildings or people. There is no longer any strategic goal; more precisely, there is a huge discrepancy between the avowed goals (the departures of Western forces from the Gulf) and the real threat they represent for the Western interests. The involved networks are made of transnational militants, who often have multiple citizenship (or no citizenship at all, like Bin Laden), and do not link their fight with a precise state or nation. Even if they come from some main-stream Islamist movements (like the Muslim Brothers) they do not identify themselves with the present strategy of these movements. They appeal to uprooted transnational militants who travel from one jihad to the other, and identify themselves with a sort of imaginary *ummah*.

Almost all of these militants shared a common point: they spent some time in Afghanistan, in Mujahidin training camps, and they are based between Lahore (Pakistan) and Kandahar (Afghanistan). This Afghan connection dates back to the early eighties. In response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a joint venture of Pakistani military services (ISI) and Saudi Intelligence (under Prince Turki Bin Faysal), with the support of the CIA, endeavoured to send to Afghanistan a kind of 'Islamic legion' to help the Afghan Mujahidin. The sponsors had different agendas. The Saudis and the Americans wanted to 'bleed the Soviets' and to defuse the growing anti-Western Islamic radicalism by diverting it against communism (especially after the 1983-4 events in Lebanon). The Saudis were also trying to enforce their Islamic credentials against the Iranian brand of Islamism, by fostering a strict Sunni militant Islam. The Pakistanis had a more long-term strategic agenda. They were the only ones who thought in terms of a post-Soviet era. They wanted to establish a kind of protectorate on Afghanistan through fundamentalist and ethnically Pashtun movements (this dual ethnic and religious connection has been a permanent feature of the Pakistani policy, even when they shifted their support from Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to the Taliban in 1994).

The purveyors of these networks were mainly Arab Muslim brothers, like Abdallah Azzam. A Palestinian holding a Jordanian passport, he headed the Peshawar office of the 'Mektab ul Khedamat', which worked as the dispatcher of the volunteers flocking from the Muslim world. (Azzam was assassinated in September 1989.) Many militants from repressed radical

The Radicalization of Sunni Conservative Fundamentalism

movements found their way to Afghanistan, among them many Egyptian leaders: Shawki Islambuli, the brother of Sadat's killer; Sheikh Omar Abdurrahman; Tala'at Fuad Qassim; Mustafa Hamza; Abou Hamza of the Gama'at; Al Zawahiri of the Jihad (who co-signed most of Bin Laden's communiqués in early 1998); and others. The fact that Sheikh Abdurrahman easily obtained a US visa from the American consulate in Khartoum, followed by a green card in 1992, is certainly a legacy of this period.

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (1989), followed by the collapse of the USSR (1991), changed the picture. The USA lost interest in these militant networks, but for different reasons the Saudis and Pakistanis still supported them. A turning point was the Gulf War of 1991: suddenly the 'Afghans', as they were called, founded a new jihad, this time against the West.

Many militants, back in their country of origin, founded or joined radical groups, some of them being splinter groups from the main-stream Islamist movements. The GIA in Algeria was founded by 'Afghans' (Tayyeb el Afghani, Jaffar al Afghani, and Sharif al Gusmi), while the pro-GIA journal in London, *al Ansar* was headed by Abu Hamza, an Egyptian who was severely wounded in Afghanistan. The Kashmiri radical movement Harakat al Ansar was also founded by former 'Afghans', as was the Yemenite Jihad, founded by Sheikh Tariq al Fadil, involved in a bloody hostage-taking of Western tourists in December 1998. By the same token, the head of the group held responsible for the attack on a group of tourists in Luxor (November 1997), Mehat Mohammed Abdel Rahman, has also travelled to Afghanistan. In the Philippines, Abu Baker Jenjalani, head of the Abu Sayyaf group (killed in 1998), also has an Afghan background (although he is one of the few to have been supported by Libya).

But other militants did not come back to their own country. They used to travel from one place to the other, fighting a nomadic jihad against the West. A group headed by Sheikh Omar Abdurrahman and Yussuf Ramzi tried to blow up the World Trade Centre in New York in 1993; both were in Afghanistan and the latter fled to Pakistan after the action. The last operation was the bombing of two US embassies in Eastern Africa. The main suspect, Mohammed Sadiq Odeh, is a Palestinian who was trained also in Afghanistan.

All these militants and networks have kept their 'Afghan' connections: Usama Bin Laden is living in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban. They are also supported in Pakistan by a cluster of political and religious organizations, loosely coordinated in the framework of the Dawat ul Irshad, established near Lahore. One finds the Islamist Jama'at-i Islami, the more conservative Jamiat-Ulama Islami, which controlled the networks of madrasas from which the Taliban movement originated, and more radical splinter groups like the Sepah-i Saheban, whose main goal is to fight Shi'ism. Some high-level former Pakistani officials, like the general Hamid Gul, former Head of the ISI at the end of the Afghan War, are also supporting the movement (Gul protested against the extradition of Ramzi to the USA and the bombings by the US forces of

the Mujahidin training camps in August 1998). These groups, which were all involved in supporting the Afghan Mujahidin, have openly turned anti-Western, in phase with a huge part of the Pakistani intelligentsia. If the Pakistani government takes its distance from Bin Laden, it openly supports the Taliban movement.

How can one assess the importance of this radical movement? It is not solely a rear-guard fighting waged by 'lost soldiers'. On one hand, it is one of the consequences of the policy of conservative re-Islamization waged by states like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (but also Egypt), and is in phase with the entry into the labour market of thousands of madrasa students. It is also a consequence of the integration of the mainstream Islamist movements into the domestic political scene, which left out militants with no state or nation. It is not a coincidence if many of these militants are uprooted Palestinian refugees, or come from the periphery of the Middle East (with the notable exception of Egypt). They are not involved in the main Middle Eastern conflict, like Palestine, because the struggle is waged by a well-rooted 'Islamist-nationalist' movement like the Hamas. All the militant actors strongly advocate supra-nationalism and practise it. The Taliban even downgraded the 'Islamic State of Afghanistan' to a 'mere' 'Emirate'. In Usama Bin Laden's networks (the Al Qaida Movement) there are Egyptians, Pakistanis, Sudanese, and Palestinians. Many of the militants, by the way, are really uprooted. They once fought in 'peripheral' jihads, like Bosnia, Kashmir, or Afghanistan, where their relations with the local population remain uneasy. Abu Hamza is an Egyptian, acting for the Algerian GIA in London, whose son-in-law (who has a British passport) was arrested in Yemen (December 1998). Yussuf Ramzi, born in Kuwait to Palestinian and Pakistani parents, went to the Philippines and to the USA. In fact, the militants are a pure product of globalization and the New World Order – using dollars, English, cellular phones, the internet, and living in camps or hotels.

Their second characteristic is that their ideology links a very conservative traditional Islam (shariat and only the shariat) with violence and terrorism. In particular, they are very anti-Shi'ite. Although their anti-shi'ism is well rooted in traditional Sunni fundamentalism, it has been catapulted by the Wahhabi influence.¹ These neo-fundamentalist radicals are rather different from the mainstream Islamist movements, not only in terms of politics but also of ideology. The Islamists, although advocating the implementation of the shariat, have a social and economic programme, coupled with a political agenda; they claim also to bypass the shi'a-sunni divide, to promote women in an Islamic society, and to not confuse Christianity and Western imperialism (Hassan al Banna was eager to establish a relationship with the Copts; Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian Islamist governments have also been eager to keep some connections with Christian groups). The conservative background of the neo-fundamentalists is by contrast clearly expressed by their insistence on the mere implementation of the shariat in order to create an Islamic society, on the confinement of women, and on hostility against the Shi'ites (branded heresy),² the Jews and

the Christians. This hostility is heralded in the name of Bin Laden's movement 'World Islamic Front for the struggle against Christians and Jews'.

Nevertheless, the main weakness of these movements is precisely their lack of constituency among the large Muslim countries (except Pakistan). ♦

*Dr Olivier Roy is Senior Researcher at the CNRS, Aix-en-Provence, France.
E-mail: oroy@compuserve.com*

Notes

1. Interestingly enough, the Wahhabi influence had less impact on another 'heresy': sufism. If Sufi practices have decreased, many of these fundamentalists, like the Taliban do acknowledge their Sufi background and did not indulge in destroying tombs of the 'Saints'.
2. This anti-Shi'as bias is well expressed in a book written by Maulana Nomani, a Pakistani deobandi, Khomeyni, Iranian revolution and the Shi'a faith, with an introduction by the Indian Muslim salafi Sayyed Nadwi, denouncing the Iranian Revolution. *Dharb-ul Mu'min*, a journal close to the Taliban and published in Karachi, has published some khotbas of Sheikh Hudaybi, imam of the Masjid-e Nabavi, who severely criticizes Christians, Jews and Shi'as, called *kuffar* (unbelievers), *rafawiz* (heretics) and *monafiqin* (hypocrites). (August 2 1998, on the Website Taliban.com).